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An Overview

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

An Overview

Larry Diamond (bio) and Leonardo Morlino (bio)

Abstract

As democracy has spread to a majority of the world's states over the past three decades, many scholars, politicians, activists, and aid administrators have gone from asking *why* transitions happen to asking *what* the new regimes are like. This

new approach focuses on what makes a democracy “good” or “better,” and on how improvements can not only be measured, but encouraged. While there is no absolutely objective way of laying out a single framework for gauging democratic quality, there are eight dimensions on which democracies vary in quality: freedom, the rule of law, vertical accountability, responsiveness, equality, participation, competition, and horizontal accountability. These dimensions are closely linked and tend to move together, either toward democratic improvement and deepening or toward decay.

As democracy has spread to a majority of the world's states over the past three decades, many scholars, politicians, activists, and aid administrators have gone from asking *why* transitions happen to asking *what* the new regimes are like. How can we evaluate—and if need be, help to improve—their quality (or any regime's quality) both as governments and as *democratic* governments? This stream of theory, methodological innovation, and empirical research flows from the notions that: 1) deepening democracy is a moral good, maybe even an imperative; 2) reforms to improve democratic quality are essential if democracy is to achieve the broad and durable legitimacy that marks consolidation; and 3) long-established democracies must also reform if they are to solve their own gathering problems of public dissatisfaction and even disillusionment.

There is plainly room for controversy here. Who, after all, is to say just what makes a “good” or “high-quality” democracy? Is a universal conception of democratic quality even possible? How can efforts to think about democratic quality avoid becoming paternalistic exercises in which the older democracies take themselves for granted as models and so escape scrutiny? How can quality assessments be made useful for political reformers, civil society activists, international donors, and others hungry for practical ways to make democracies better? These are only some of the questions that pervade this growing subfield of study.

The five essays that follow are part of a collaborative effort, launched at a conference at Stanford University, to elaborate and refine the

concept of democratic quality and to apply it to a series of six paired [End Page 20] country comparisons.¹ We asked each author to discuss a particular dimension of the quality of democracy such as freedom, the rule of law, vertical accountability, responsiveness, and equality (our own list, and by no means exhaustive). We wanted each author to explain how the dimension in question relates to other dimensions in our framework, to suggest possible indicators for measuring the dimension, to identify ways in which this element of democratic quality is subverted in the real world, and to offer (where possible) policy recommendations. Our full framework features eight dimensions: the five outlined above, plus participation, competition, and horizontal accountability. Other dimensions might include transparency and the effectiveness of representation. The different aspects of democratic quality overlap, however, and we choose to treat these latter two as elements of our principal dimensions.

We attempt here to identify some of the ways in which the different elements of democracy not only overlap, but also depend upon one another, forming a system in which improvement along one dimension (such as participation) can have beneficial effects along others (such as equality and accountability). At the same time, however, there can be trade-offs between the different dimensions of democratic quality, and it is impossible to maximize all of them at once. In this sense at least, every democratic country must make an inherently value-laden choice about what *kind* of democracy it wishes to be.

Talk of a "good" or "better" democracy implies knowing what democracy is. At a minimum, democracy requires: 1) universal, adult suffrage; 2) recurring, free, competitive, and fair elections; 3) more than one serious political party; and 4) alternative sources of information.² If elections are to be truly meaningful, free, and fair, there must be some degree of civil and political freedom beyond the...

The Quality of Democracy

AN OVERVIEW

Larry Diamond and Leonardo Morlino

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